DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 389 702 SP 036 362

AUTHOR Oliver, Helen; Utermohlen, Robert
TITLE An Innovative Teaching Strategy: Using Critical Thinking To Give Students a Guide to the Future.
PUB DATE [95]
NOTE 12p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Black Colleges; *Career Planning; College Students; *Critical Thinking; Education Courses; Elementary Secondary Education; Foundations of Education; Higher Education; Preservice Teacher Education; Program Descriptions; Program Effectiveness; *Strategic Planning; *Teaching Methods; Thinking Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Rust College MS

ABSTRACT

College students in a Foundations of Education class at Rust College (Mississippi), a small historically black liberal arts college, were required in 1993 and again in 1994 to develop a modified personal strategic plan using critical thinking skills. The plan had four components: a family history; a present situation; a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOTs) list; and a "scenario" for a planned future. In addition, some students added a mission statement. The components were developed over a 6-week period. Each week, the class members prepared initial drafts of a particular component of the plan for which they were allowed 2 weeks and which were not graded. Each was read and returned to the student with comments. The polished final draft was due early in the final week of the module (an 8-week session with daily classes of 90 minutes). The most committed students prepared the best papers with background material woven into the scenario; they named a future for themselves that was realistic and achievable. The results indicated that the program was a useful device for prompting the use of higher level thought processes among graduate students but possiblly beyond the experiential reach of some undergraduates. Finished products were better in 1994 than in 1993, due probably to the 1994 requirement that the plan's components be created one at a time on a weekly basis. (JB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

SP

Helen Oliver, Ph.D. & Robert Utermohlen, Ed.D.
Rust College
150 E. Rust Avenue
Holly Springs, Mississippi 38635
(601) 252-8000 Ext. 4090

ED 389 702

AN INNOVATIVE TEACHING STRATEGY: USING CRITICAL THINKING TO GIVE STUDENTS A GUIDE TO THE FUTURE

By Helen Oliver, Ph.D and Robert Utermohlen, Ed.D.

As the complexity of the world grows and accelerates, more and more students are becoming passive absorbers of information they encounter. Uncritically they accept what they see and hear, rather than actively using their intelligence, knowledge and skills to make personal choices about what to accept and what to reject. Consequently, it is important that faculty acquire strategies to assist them in helping students learn to develop and effectively apply critical thinking skills to their academic studies, to the complex problems that they will face, and to the critical choices they will be forced to make as a result of the information explosion and other rapid technological changes.

For the past year faculty members at Rust College, a small historically black liberal arts college in Mississippi have been defining and discussing critical thinking and the new teaching strategies (process, cooperative and collaborative learning) for enhancing students learning. The rationale is that students come to us anew, as

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
H Oliver
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

SP036362

visual and interactive learners, and institutions acknowledging this reality should consider innovative teaching strategies that create stimulating learning environments for students.

Coon (1995) defines critical thinking as "the ability to evaluate, compare, analyze, critique, and synthesize information" (p.27). Others, Ryan et al (1995) see critical thinking as "a general instructional approach intended to help students evaluate the worth of ideas, opinions or evidence before making a decision or judgment." The integration of critical thinking into subject areas appears to be the direction of the future fostering a need to create classroom environments conducive to critical thought (Barell, Liebmann & Sigel, 1988).

Gamson (1994) describes process, discovery, cooperative and collaborative learning environments as nuances of higher education during the past decade. These concepts grew out of dissatisfaction among faculty of various disciplines with (1) simply lecturing; (2) searching for ways to reach the current generation of students; (3) searching for ways to improve academic performance and retention; and (4) developing new avenues for learning and research efforts with faculty and students. Many of these same faculty have found successful alternatives in these learning concepts. This article presents a four-part innovative teaching strategy useful to

More

faculty everywhere in helping students gain a sense of the future.

STUDENTS' GUIDE TO THE FUTURE

For the past two years, each student in a Foundations of Education class at Rust College was required to develop a modified personal strategic plan. The plan had four components: a family history, a present situation, a SWOTs list and a Scenario (**Figure 1**). Some students added a mission statement to the mix. The

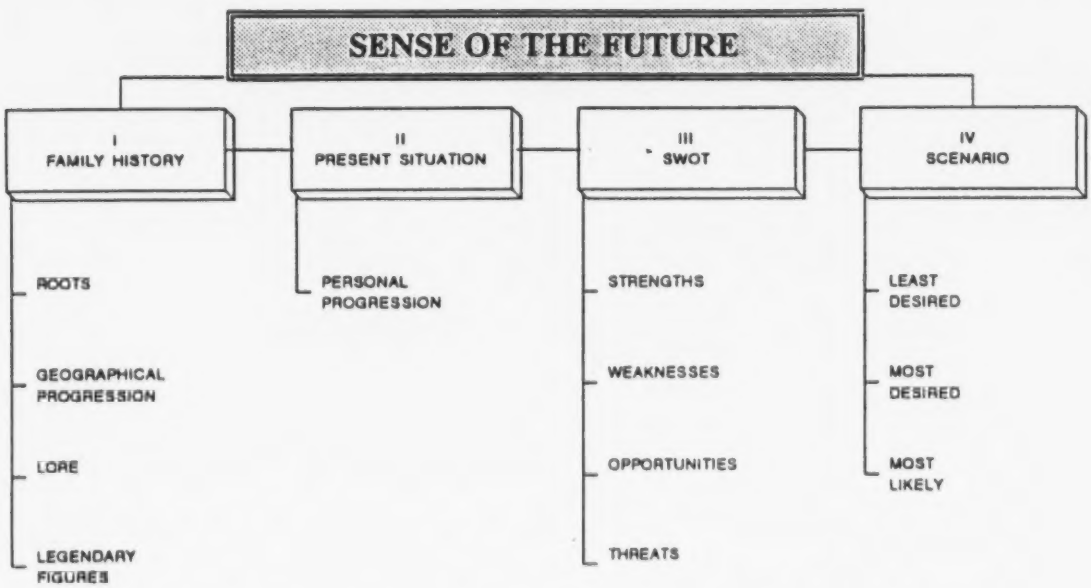

Figure 1: Process Model Of The Personal Strategic Plan

More

components of the plan were developed over a six week period. Each week, the class members prepared initial drafts of a particular component of the plan. The sole exception to this pattern was the scenario. Two weeks were allowed for the development of that draft. The initial drafts were not graded. Each was read and returned to the student with comments on the margins. The polished final draft was due early in the final week of the module (the modular system consists of eight weeks with students attending daily for ninety minutes).

COMPONENTS OF THE PLAN

FAMILY HISTORY:

Students were required to give attention to their roots as a way to better understand and appreciate themselves. Consequently, they were asked to trace, as best they could, the geographical progression of the family from one place of residence to another up to the present. They were asked to include family lore in the history. This included such matters as family stories passed from one generation to the next, family expectations, e.g. what does it mean to be a Jones or a Smith, etc. Students were also asked to name family "legendary figures" - those ancestors who, in one way or another, seemed larger than life and were dominant members of the family tree.

More

PRESENT SITUATION:

This portion of the plan was contemporary and personal. It addressed the student's progression through life up to the Fall 1994. Each student was asked to name those individuals who were particularly relevant to his/her developmental process. This section also described the manner by which the student found his/her way to the Rust College campus.

SWOT's LIST:

The SWOT acronym stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. Each student prepared a separate list of single words or short phrases for each attribute or quality. The lists have two primary foci: they are either internal or external. Strengths and weaknesses are internal. They apply to the individual. Representative strengths might be ACT scores, honors won, skills acquired and mentors. Weaknesses could be the lack of certain strengths. They also may include loans assumed for educational purposes, current health and physical problems as well as those which might surface in the future as part of the student's genetic heritage, for example, diabetes, glaucoma, and so on. The opportunities and threats are external. They are beyond the individual's immediate control but still must be confronted. They are identified through constant and ongoing scans of the environment. Of particular importance are those social, political and ecological

More

events which have implications for the individual's future. This portion of the plan was not done as well as we had hoped. Many students used a very limited world from which to seek clues to the future.

SCENARIO:

Scenarios are used to develop planned futures. Commonly, there are three kinds: least-desired, most-desired and most-likely. The data from the earlier-named components provide the raw material with which the scenario writer works. Once developed, each scenario describes the events which either must or must not occur if it is to become a reality. The value, of course, is to develop strategies to enhance the likelihood that the desired future is achieved and to avoid a negative one. Each student was asked to develop a most-desired future. The multi-page narrative, first, established who the narrator had become by the year 2035 (an anticipated retirement time). Once that state in life had been named, the narrative then described the life route, both personal and professional, that had been taken to arrive at the desired point.

RESULTS:

As expected, the most committed students prepared the best papers. Such papers were well conceived - the background material was extensive and woven into the scenario. These students named a future for themselves which was realistic and

More

achievable - if they took full advantage of their abilities and opportunities. For example, several of them determined that they would ultimately become the superintendents of sizeable school districts - a possibility not beyond their reach and certainly a goal worth pursuing.

Would we use this process again with undergraduates? Yes, but with a shorter time frame. It might be more appropriate to name one's position in life in intervals of five or ten years, rather than to take the leap immediately to a retirement date or one could use combined strategies. Now, for the ultimate question - is this assignment representative of critical thinking? We believe so. We believe that the strategic plan is a useful device for the utilization of higher level thought processes and therefore provides a first-hand example of critical thinking and problem solving.

In summary, the strategic plan assignment was given to students in the Foundation of Education courses in 1993 and 1994. How did it turn out? The finished product was better developed in 1994 than in 1993. This was attributed to the requirement that the plan's components be created one at a time on a weekly basis. In 1993, only the final draft was seen at the end of the module. We suspect many of those 1993 drafts were developed only a day or two before their due date.

Does the exercise have value? We believe that it does. We hope that it will

More

help each class member to think in larger terms than heretofore. That it will be viewed as one possible road map into the future and will provide some compulsion to make the plan a reality. Will this happen? We do not know. The plan is a useful device for graduate students but may be beyond the experiential reach of some undergraduates. However, we are convinced of one thing. People who cannot imagine themselves in some desired state are unlikely to ever achieve that state.

CONCLUSION:

Although the most common teaching strategy in higher education is still the lecture, benefits in the new teaching methods are evident. These approaches have (1) improved student retention; and (2) have important cognitive, affective, and social effects on students. The complexity of thinking increases, as does acceptance of different ideas. The motivation for learning increases, and there is a sense of connection among students even when they are quite different from one another. The methods are time consuming and require detailed planning initially but the benefits far exceed the difficulties.

A growing body of evidence supports the effectiveness of these strategies and has attracted new faculty adherents and has appealed to administrators and policy makers as possible solutions to institutional problems. The good news is that faculty can be trained in the new techniques, and, armed with more theoretical understanding

More

of these learning strategies, will be provided with increased "how to" practical classroom applications. The extra time needed for planning and coordinating these activities is worth it, for as John Dewey has said, "Education is a social process, education is growth, education is not preparation for life, education is life itself."

End

REFERENCES

Barell, J. Liebmann, R., & Sigel, I. (April, 1988). Fostering thoughtful self-direction in students. Educational Leadership, 45, 14-17.

Coon, D. (1995). "Critical thinking-Palms, Planets, and Personality". In Introduction to Psychology: Exploration and Application. MN: West Publishing.

Gamson, Z. (Sept/Oct 1994). Collaborative learning comes of age. Change.

Johnson, D. W. & Johnson, R. T. (1994). Learning together and alone: cooperative, competitive, and individualistic learning. MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Ryan, K. & Cooper, J. M. (1995). Those who can teach. MA: Houghton Mifflin Co.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Helen Oliver is an associate professor of education and director of service-learning at Rust College, Holly Springs, Mississippi 38635. **Dr. Robert Utermohlen** is a former school superintendent in Minnesota and former professor of education at Mankato University, Mankato, Minnesota. He is a visiting professor of education at Rust College.